THE PASSIVE VOICE IN INFORMATIVE NON-TECHNICAL PROSE

Constance Holcomb
Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México
E. N. E. P. Aragón

INTRODUCTION

In developing materials to be used in teaching reading in English to university students, one of the first steps which must be taken is a linguistic analysis of the texts which the students are likely to read. Such an analysis is necessary in order to identify those structures and lexical items which will be most relevant to the students' needs, and, thus, to be able to incorporate them appropriately into the new materials. While many such analyses have been carried out in technical and scientific English, very little work has been done in the areas of the social sciences and humanities.

This paper reports on an initial study of one of the syntactic patterns often found in the written language of these neglected disciplines, the passive voice. Passive constructions are quite commonly found in scientific exposition (Huddleston 1971), and this is reflected in the materials which have so far been developed for the teaching of technical English. However, there is also a notable consistency in the frequency of the passive voice in informative prose in general (Svartvik 1966).

The following specific topics are treated in this paper: the frequency of active verb strings which could have been made passive; the occurrence and use of the agent with the passive; the occurrence and use of agentless passive constructions; and, some of the major reasons for which the passive voice is used.

The field of political science is the focus here, since it is in this area that foreign language requirements are common at the bachelor's level at universities in Mexico, and in which a great deal of reading about current events is usually emphasized. The corpus which was used for this analysis was taken from an article which appeared in the July 1977 issue of Foreign Affairs (Vol. 55, No. 4), entitled "The Realities of U. S. - Mexican Relations", by Richard R. Fagen. A number of articles appearing in recent issues of five professional journals having

a political science orientation were considered. This article was chosen for study because of the relevance of its content to the Mexican student, and the likelihood that it would be read by Mexican political science majors. The first 2,000 words of the article were used as the corpus.

In an active construction, the subject is usually the agent (or "act-or") of the verb, and the objects are either the patient (direct object) or the beneficiary (indirect object) of the action. Here, a construction is considered passive if the patient or beneficiary has assumed the position of the subject; the agent, if given, appears as the complement of a phrase usually marked by the preposition "by". Thus, the passive is viewed as a word order device which shows that the subject is not the actor.

The view of the passive embraces a number of subtypes. Those which are found in the corpus studied and which are considered passive verb strings are the following reduced forms:

A. Post-modifying non-finite clauses which are regarded as reduced relative clauses, where both the relative marker and the be form are dropped, as in the following example where "needed" is considered a passive verb string:

". . . if Mexico were to undertake the kinds of programs needed to make a dent on poverty. . . ." (p. 690)

B. Adverbial non-finite clauses, reduced in such a way that either
1. the subordinator, the passive subject, and the be form are dropped, as in the following example where "resented", "criticized", and "preyed" are considered passive verb strings:

"Resented. . , criticized. . , preyed upon . . , their lot is by no means a happy one." (p. 688); or,

2. the subordinator is present and the passive subject and the form of be are dropped, as in the following example where "evaluated" is considered a passive verb string: "However evaluated, . . . the U.S. presence. . . is enormous." (p. 686)

Since this paper concerns the passive voice as a formal syntactic construction, and because of the underlying practical use information

about this construction might have, it excludes consideration of those structures that may be semantically similar to the passive, but formally dissimilar. That is, such structures as "the door opened," and "the book sold," though they might be thought of as semantically passive, are not considered in this paper.

OBSERVATIONS

Within the 2,000 word corpus, 210 verb strings were identified, 30 of which are syntactically passive. Of these 30 passive strings, 15, or half of them, appear as reduced forms of the types described above, in the following proportion: type A: 5 strings, type B 1: 5 strings, and type B 2: 5 strings. Through the use of reduction, the writer has avoided uninformative phrases such as "who are" and "which is" (type A); he has also eliminated much redundancy and wordiness by dropping the passive subject when it was co-referential with that of the superordinate clause (type B 1 and 2) and by letting the reader supply the understood subordinators in the participial clauses (type B 1). Of the remaining 180 verb strings, 69 active strings were identified as having a potential for becoming passive.

AGENTFUL PASSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS

The number of occurrences of the agent with the passive structures is minimal; of the 30 passive strings, only 8 appeared with agents, 3 of which were inanimate and 5 animate. In 2 of these 8 cases, the agent was not given in a "by" phrase, but rather in phrases beginning with other prepositions. The phrases in these two cases, however, obviously have an agent-like function:

(1) "Some issues can actually be removed from the negotiating agenda through treaties, agreements, and cooperative action." (p. 687)

(2) ". . . it is a very positive phenomenon when viewed from the perspective of Mexican elites." (p. 689)

It is interesting to note that 6 of the 8 agents appeared with reduced passive verb strings. Thus, where certain elements, perhaps redundant or in any case not necessary, were dropped at the beginning of the passive construction, another element, ie., the agent, was added to the end of the construction, suggesting that in some way the deletion of one might have affected the inclusion of the other, or vice versa. The following example illustrates the use of an agent in a "by" phrase following the reduced passive construction, "drawn":

(3) ". . . they flee poverty and unemployment in
     Mexico, drawn by the promise and possibilities
     of economic opportunities in the north." (p. 688)

In 7 of the 8 agentful passive constructions, the agent contained new
information, as in examples (1), (2), and (3) above.   In these 7 cases,
the agent appeared as a syntactically complex structure, the most complex
being the following:

(4) "So across the border they come, sometimes
     making it on their own, sometimes smuggled
     across by coyotes who charge high fees in
     advance to their human contraband and then
     often also collect substantial payments from
     the employers to whom they deliver the low-
     cost labor." (p. 688)

AGENTLESS PASSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS

In this corpus, 22 of the 30 passive verb strings appeared without
agents.   This high frequency of occurrence of agentless passive con-
structions is to be expected, for several reasons.   In many cases, the
agent is understood and need not be given since it is recoverable from the
linguistic or situational context.   In other cases, the agent is not given
because it is unknown, or irrelevant to the subject at hand.   Also, where
the writer is specifying a number of actions carried out by the same actor,
it would generally be regarded as stylistically undesirable to repeat the
agent with each action.

There also may be extra-linguistic reasons for using the agentless
passive.   The corpus, it will be remembered, is political in nature, the
underlying theme being the advantages as well as the problems of being
"good-neighborly."   Given the politically sensitive nature of this theme,
it is easy to imagine that there would be occasions in which a simple
statement of fact would appear to place blame on one of the two countries,
or on certain persons therein; an urging that action be taken by one or the
other country might have the effect of pointing fingers or an unwarranted
signaling of responsibility.   Any of these interpretations could create ill-
will, arouse suspicions of the writer's prejudice, and the effect of the
entire article might then be negative.   However, on every occasion where
the naming of an agent might have resulted in a statement which could have
been construed as accusatory or offensive, the writer reverted to a pas-
sive agentless construction.   Observe the following examples: The author
could have, but did not say, "A small minority in Mexico has collected
the primary benefits of the impressive growth of the Mexican economy."

Rather, he said,

> (5) ". . . despite the impressive growth of the Mexican
>   economy, . . . the primary benefits. . . have been
>   distributed only to a minority of the population. . . ."
>   (p. 690)

The writer did not say, "The conditions leading to illegal immigration
are in Mexico, not in the U.S., therefore, Mexico, not the U.S., must
take the major remedial actions." What the writer said was,

> (6) "The conditions leading to this immigration are in
>   Mexico, not in the U. S., and it is there that the
>   major remedial actions must be taken." (p. 689)

The writer could have said, "The U. S. industry, agriculture, and
service sectors locate undocumented Mexicans in the lowest paid and
least desirable jobs where these illegals can supply cheap labor," but,
instead, he said,

> (7) "As workers they are located in the lowest paid and
>   least desirable jobs, supplying cheap labor. . . to
>   industry, agriculture, and the service sector." (p. 688)

These, then, are examples of cases in which the author, by the skillful
use of agentless passive constructions, has given his prose a less personal,
more objective tone.

THE DETERMINATION OF VOICE AS
A RESULT OF SYNTACTIC ORDERING

While it is difficult to answer the question of why the passive is
used in informative prose rather than the active, there is one clear and
obvious reason; it may be used where no agent is specified, and, as we
have seen, there are certain circumstances when this is desirable. In
many situations, however, the use of the active or passive is governed by
features that are not so easily recognized. Yet, there are certain factors
which dictate this decision, since in nearly every case, only one of the two
constructions really fits the linguistic context. We can observe that most
active sentences which are appropriate in their contexts are just "grotesque
curiosities" when they are changed into the passive (Svartvik 1966), and
vice versa.

Several writers (Ward 1966); (Swales 1971; et al) have suggested
that a fundamental reason for using the passive is to bring the object of

the active sentence into greater prominence by making it the subject of the new sentence. This suggestion, however, is difficult to accept in view of the data obtained from this study. Here, 2 of the 30 passive constructions had subjects filled by "it", and, as we have seen, another 15 had dropped the subject entirely.

Some of the syntactic features which dictate voice, whether active or passive, can be observed by a closer examination of the linguistic context in which these constructions are found. I believe that a writer, in most cases, does not first choose the voice class, and subsequently order his other material accordingly; rather, the reverse is true. The agent, patient, beneficiary, and other items are manipulated by the writer within the structure of a sentence in order to give them different kinds of prominence and to place emphasis on that which is important for understanding his message (Quirk 1973). In order to avoid disruption of the natural development of discourse, the writer fills the subject and object "slots" with that which is necessary to achieve his purposes, or he may decide not to fill them at all. Once this decision is made, he uses the voice class which fits the linguistic context he has created. It, therefore, can be said that the syntactic relations between the elements of a sentence, other than the verb string, usually determine the choice of voice.

There are certain factors which influence the ordering of a sentence. One of these is the tendency to place thematic elements, ie., those which convey new or unknown facts, towards the end of the sentence, and to open a sentence with thematic elements, facts known from the verb or the situational context (Svartvik 1966). Another tendency is to place the more complex parts of a sentence at the end. Quirk (1973) refers to the first as the principle of "end-focus" and the second as the principle of "end-weight." In addition to these tendencies, there is also a strong tendency in English to avoid placing finite clauses in the subject position.

There are many examples of these principles and their effect on voice in the corpus. As we have seen in examples (3) and (4) above, where the writer has desired to give prominence to the new information carried by the agent, he has placed the agent toward the end of the sentence (end-focus), especially if it was also syntactically complex (end-weight). Where the writer wished to give prominence to information about the patient, rather than the patient itself, and where the agent was irrelevant, he has placed the patient at the beginning, dropped the agent, and put his new, important, and structurally complex information at the end, forcing a passive voice construction. This can be observed in the following examples:

(8) "Various scenarios and programs have been

proposed. . , ranging from stricter security
measures, to various kinds of identity cards,
to fines for employers who knowingly hire
undocumented workers." (p. 689)

(9) "Very large scale and carefully designed
programs of rural development and job
creation are needed to make the north and
central plateau of Mexico at least minimally
attractive to the tens of thousands of new job
seekers who come into the labor market each
year." (p. 689)

In the corpus, 69 active verb strings were identified as having a
potential for passivization. Here again, in the majority of cases, the
voice was dictated by the syntactic arrangement of the sentence elements.
If these verb strings had been made passive, and pertinant syntactic
changes carried out, the result would have produced a complete change
in focus and weight, and therefore, would not have reflected the intent of
the writer. Thus, although these strings had the potential for becoming
passive (ie., a potential inherent in the verb), very few, if any would
have actually been made passive in the contexts in which they appear.
This is clearly observed when, in the following three examples, one tries
to impose a change of voice:

(10) ". . . the migration annually drains off hundreds of
thousands of persons who would otherwise swell the
ranks of the unemployed." (p. 689)

(11) ". . . to have Yankee imperialism. . . even
mentioned in the White House suggests a modicum
of historical candor." (p. 685)

(12) ". . . for if Yankee imperialism has any dominant
meaning in Mexico today, it clearly refers to the
U.S. economic presence, not the dusty troops and
steaming gunboats of times past." (p. 686)

In example (13) below, the subject slot is filled with "one", a
syntactic device which is often quite easily converted into a passive
construction:

(13) "One can only hope along with both Presidents that
there will be more blessing than curse in Mexico's
necessarily close relationship with the U.S." (p. 685)

However, in this case, a passive would not fit the context because the writer has chosen to include "along with both Presidents, " which will not permit the inanimate filler "it", as in *"It can only be hoped along with both Presidents. . . ."

In cases where the elements in the sentence could have been ordered in more than one way, without regard for end-focus or end-weight, and with no appreciable change in meaning or intent, the writer arranged the elements so as to maintain continuity with the contexts preceding and following the sentence . In the following example,

> (14) "The immigration issue thus suggest a basic
>   truth about Mexico, . . ." (p. 690)

the writer places "the immigration issue" initially, because it ties in with the information he has given in previous sentences. He places "a basic truth" in the final-clause position, because he is about to expand on this idea. Since he has chosen this order, the verb string here must be active.

Observe, also, the following example, where the writer has maintained continuity between sentences through syntactic ordering:

> (15) ". . . it is little wonder that both U. S. and Mexican
>   policy-makers usually move cautiously when trying
>   to deal with this issue. Yet be dealt with it must,
>   . . . " (p. 689)

Here, the writer is focusing on "to deal with this issue, " which he places at the end of the sentence (end-focus). He then picks up the same focal point in the following clause, placing it as close to clause-initial position as possible by dropping the agent, thereby forcing a passive construction. Notice that "must" is placed in clause-final position, so that it not only receives focus, but in no way interrupts the "to deal with" - "be dealt with" sequence.

SUMMARY

In summary, then, the determination of voice, whether active or passive, is, in most cases, not a matter of choice on the part of the writer; rather, it is determined by the syntactic order of the sentence elements other than the verb string, and this order reflects the intent of the writer and focus he wishes to give to his material. There are some cases, however, in which the writer might purposefully choose to use a passive construction, especially where he believes it is inconvenient or undesirable to state the agent in the context.

18

Although this study has been limited to a very small corpus, the observations made here are relevant to the teaching of English for special purposes, and they should be considered in the development of EFL teaching materials which address themselves to the problem of the passive voice in informative prose.

REFERENCES

Close, R. A. The English We Use for Science, Longman, London, 1965

Ewer, J. R., and G. LaTorre. A Course in Basic Scientific English. Longman, London, 1969.

Huddleston, Rodney D. The Sentence in Written English: A Syntactic Study Based on an Analysis of Scientific Texts. Cambridge University Press, London, 1971.

Joos, Martin. The English Verb, Form and Meanings. University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1964.

Palmer, F. R. A Linguistic Study of the English Verb. University of Miami Press, Coral Gables, Fla., 1968.

Quirk, Randolph and Sidney Breenbaum. A Concise Grammar of Contemporary English. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc. New York, 1973.

Svartvik, Jan. On Voice in the English Verb. Mouton & Co., The Hague, 1966.

Swales, John. Writing Scientific English. Thomas Nelson and Sons, Ltd. London, 1971.

Ward, John Millington. The Use of Tenses in English. Longman, London, 1966.